



ADDRESS BOOK

Crystal Springs Mountain Lodge
27-13/253-7000;
crystalsprings.co.za;
doubles from USD 70.

Sabi River Sun Lifestyle Resort
27-13/737-7311;
southern.sun.com; doubles from USD 192.

Sabi Sabi Bush Lodge
27-13/735-5656; sabisabi.com; doubles from 815.

Summerfields Rose Retreat & Spa
27-13/737-6500;
summerfields.co.za; room rates for USD 63, including breakfast.

Walkerson at Dullstroom
27-13/253-7000;
walkersons.co.za; doubles from USD 200.

AFRICAN AFFAIR

A LOT OF TRAVELLERS LOOKING FOR THE KRUGER EXPERIENCE USUALLY FLY IN FROM JOHANNESBURG TO THE KRUGER MPUMALANGA AIRPORT NOT BECAUSE THEY ARE SHORT ON TIME BUT MOSTLY BECAUSE THEY ARE APPREHENSIVE ABOUT THE SAFETY OF A SELF-DRIVE. **RISHAD SAAM MEHTA** DISCOVERS THAT IT'S NOT ONLY A SUPREMELY SATISFYING DRIVE, BUT ONE PACKED WITH ADVENTURE.

SOUTH AFRICAN SOJOURN Clockwise from top: Enroute from Johannesburg to Kruger National Park; a herd of zebras; a giraffe strikes a pose. Opposite, from top: A gushing waterfall along the way; spotting a rhino up-close.



A BABY HIPPO LOUNGES JUST UNDER the surface of the water with only its Shrek-like ears and bulging eyes breaking the surface of the water, like the periscope of a submarine. A few feet away on the banks of the pond that is an offshoot of the Sabi River, I am concealed in a hippo-hide hoping that the little creature waddles onto the sandbank. The hippo-hide is a well-concealed shack on the edge of the golf greens of the Sabi River Sun Lifestyle Resort in Hazyview, Mpumalanga, South Africa. After breakfast, I'd casually strolled here with my cup of coffee to try my luck at sighting some wildlife.

As I am photographing the baby hippopotamus, I notice a slight movement at the periphery of my viewfinder. It is as if the sandbank is shifting by itself so I zoom into that area and draw a sharp breath. I see a fully grown crocodile stealthily inching towards the hippo. Its movements are very measured and supplements its camouflage, and the baby hippo remains blissfully unaware of this impending danger. All of a sudden the water erupts with a great roar as a huge, water-tanker-sized hippo bursts out of the pond, jaws gaping and baring its scimitar-like fangs menacingly. The crocodile stops in its tracks. The mother hippo had

seen the predator and warned the reptile with a show of strength and aggression.

Hardly 50 feet behind me, on the greens, golfers dressed in branded apparel putt about chasing their golf balls in electric buggies. This is what continues to fascinate me about Africa—how urbanity and the wild continue to coexist.

Two days earlier, I had visited a tiny 19th-century mining village called Pilgrim's Rest while staying at a resort called Crystal Springs Mountain Lodge. This resort is adjacent to a 2,000-hectare natural reserve comprising rolling hills, vast grasslands and plenty of watering holes. The concierge at the resort has informative maps of driving trails as well as walks within the reserve.

On my first morning there, I had set off at sunrise to the trailhead of the kudu trail and had hardly driven a kilometre into the reserve, when I sighted a herd of zebras sunning themselves in the rising sun. In the 11 kilometres that it took me to get to the trailhead, I saw kudus, giraffes, buffaloes and even a solitary leopard. Just ahead of me, there was a family of five in their hired car and every time we spotted an animal, the children got super excited. To my delight, the family was also headed for the kudu walk, so I joined them. The walk stood out since the kids with their keen



eyesight and hearing, could spot birds and animals and even recognized certain calls. The parents proudly told me that they had been out walking in Africa plenty of times with the children, right since the time they learned how to walk and now they've come to love and respect the great outdoors.

TODAY AT HAZYVIEW, AFTER BEING A privileged spectator to the hide-and-seek played out between the hippopotamus and the crocodile, I really didn't want to spend my day on the golf course as was the plan. So I get into my little hired Hyundai i20 and drive to the Phabeni Gate that is 12 kilometres away. Kruger National Park that adjoins Mpumalanga has a total of nine gates with five of these in the south of the park. The beauty of Kruger is that you can take your own car into the park, and drivers can look forward to a mixture of tarmac roads and dirt tracks. Most of the latter are suitable for cars like the i20. Once again I am incredibly lucky because just a few minutes into the park, I come

across giraffes feeding on bushes with lethally long thorns. A family of four in their car also halt next to me and the children point happily to the giraffes who are feeding on the flowers of this bush. They tell me that giraffes are engineered to eat these flowers because they have long tongues that enable them to reach in between the thorns and pluck out the flowers.

Kruger has a number of rest camps within the park where tourists can stay overnight, and day visitors like me can stop for refreshments. At these camps there is usually a large map of the park with coloured pins that represent different animals. For instance, red is for lions, blue for elephants, yellow for cheetahs, black for leopards, and so on—that inform visitors where the most recent sighting of a particular animal has been. However, there are no pins for rhinos as an anti-poaching measure.

I am keen to see the lions and I spot a cluster of red on a loop road not too far from the Skukuza Rest Camp, where



WILD WONDER
Clockwise from right: A leopard lounges in the grassland; a herd of buffaloes at a watering hole; lions amble on a dirt track.



DRIVING GUIDE

South Africa is an ideal place for a driving holiday with some soft adventure and wildlife viewing, but keep these in mind.

- It is imperative to have an International Driving Permit (IDP) as some policemen demand it in addition to your driver's licence.

- There are plenty of hidden speed cameras and patrol cars monitoring traffic.

- Never pick up hitchhikers even if they wave bank notes at you.

- You are most vulnerable to crime when you are at an ATM. Choose ATMs that are well lit and in busy surroundings.

- Kruger National Park may seem empty but there are eyes watching (animal as well as electronic), so stay in your car. Elephants and rhinos look cumbersome but they can be very swift if need be. If you see an elephant in musth (secreting behind the eyes and constantly dripping urine), stay well away.

- Never swim in a waterhole that hasn't been declared safe for swimming. Crocodiles and hippos are always lounging in them.

- Go for bush walks only on walking trails and if you see snakes (which you will), give them a wide berth.

- You can hire a car from Avis or Budget or Hertz at O R Tambo International Airport, Johannesburg, but pre-booking is always cheaper.

- A day pass for driving around in Kruger in your own car costs Rs 1,159 and is well worth it.

I had stopped earlier for a quick coffee. The loop roads are dirt tracks that go in a circuit off the main roads and very often yield good sightings. The loop road I take goes around a huge *kopje* (local lingo for a cluster of rocks) and the pins had indicated that a lion had been spotted here. I halt by the *kopje* and realize that the jungle is deathly still—not a bird in the sky or a cackling baboon on a tree. And then I hear it. What starts like a low rumble of an idling diesel motor, grows into a terrifying moan that chills the marrow in my bones, ending in a series of rattles and grunts. I had just heard the roar of a full grown male lion and from the sound of it, he wasn't too far. As if in confirmation, a magnificent lion with a regal mane steps onto the *kopje* not more than 15 feet from where I am parked. I grab my camera and poke the upper half of my body out of the car's window but the lion lets out such an earth-shattering roar on seeing me do this that I pull myself in and rapidly wind up the glass. The huge cat continues to glare at me with its topaz eyes. Then, a lioness cooly steps out and languidly rubs herself against the lion, mewling and purring. After a few minutes she is followed by four cuddly cubs. It is then that I realize that I have intruded on some quality family time and quickly drive off.

BACK ON THE TARMAC ROAD, I HALT UNDER THE shade of a tree to eat my packed lunch. I am halfway through when I hear a rustling in the bushes by the car and look at the passenger window, and drop my sandwich in shock. A magnificently horned rhino is looking into my car and his gigantic head fills the window. I think he is as startled by my shout of

surprise as I am by the sight of him and he hurriedly backs up a few steps. In a few moments, out of the bushes comes his friend—another horned rhino and both of them stare at me for a few moments before going back to grazing. Looking at them so close to me, I can see the number of muscles rhinoceroses pack. In fact they are built like little armoured tanks and even lions are wary about messing with them. That horn could have gone through my car like a knitting needle through a paper bag. That entire day I spend driving around Kruger is filled with fantastic moments like these, and I encounter various animals like kudus, zebras, buffaloes and elephants.

My last two days in South Africa are at the Sabi Sands Reserve which adjoins Kruger National Park—and there are no physical boundaries between the two. The Sabi Sabi Bush Lodge where I am staying is well within the reserve and during my two nights there, I hear plenty of lions and even see fresh pug marks in the courtyard of my cottage. Besides that, one particular elephant would amble into the property to drink water from the swimming pool. In fact just beyond the dining deck of the Bush Lodge, there is a watering hole and the naturalists inform me that during the dry season, guests usually have fantastic Big Five sightings right from the deck while sipping their gin and tonics. Since Sabi Sands is a private reserve, safaris are only by way of open Land Rovers operated by the many lodges within the reserve. The advantage of these safaris is that the knowledge of the naturalists and the keen eye of the tracker enhance the wildlife experience. +